THE POLITICIZATION OF THE PHILIPPINE CATHOLIC CHURCH

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The Church has played a key role in Western civil society since the dawn of history. Its ministers and key officials (or clerics) not only served as religious pastors but also as king's counsels, *de facto* rulers, power brokers, and "shepherds" of men. These mixed roles inextricably placed the church at the center of social changes and political upheavals. It was never a passive or peripheral spectator in the unfolding historical events.

The Catholic Church in the Philippines performed most of these roles. It was very influential especially during the Spanish period when it was first established in the Philippines, prompting Marcelo H. del Pilar, one of the fearless Filipino reformists of the period, to conclude that there was frailocracy or monastic supremacy in the country. Historians say that the Filipinos were colonized by Spain more by the "rosary" and less by the "sword." The revolutions of 1896 and 1898 and the American occupation led to the secularization of the Philippine state and to the adoption of the doctrine of separation of church and state. These events started the formal depoliticization of the Catholic Church as well as the mixed and, at times, competing perceptions of the doctrine by the clergy, government officials and some sectoral leaders.

Lately, some sectors are anxiously asking whether the Catholic Church, particularly the clergy led by Cardinal Sin, is violating the constitutional doctrine of separation of church and state by continually taking a "fiscalizing" or "oppositionist" stance on many political, economic and social policies and programs taken by the Ramos administration.

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Indeed, why is the church playing an active political role in the post-Marcos era? What has been the role perception of key and influential Catholic church leaders? How do the people also view the role performance of the church? What are the implications of all of these to church-state relations in the future? These are some of the questions this study addresses.

Brief Historical Background

As stated earlier, the Catholic Church was a major, if not the leading, political player during the Spanish period (1565-1898). This was made possible by the union of church and state and legitimized by the more permanent and pervasive presence of the religious bureaucracy (compared to the civil bureaucracy) in various parts of the country. As pointed out by a legal luminary:

> "Religious officials were deemed to be persons in authority. Ecclesiastical authorities held key political positions. Four incumbents in the office of the Governor- General, the highest and most powerful office in the islands, were either archbishops or bishops. In the Board of Authorities (Junta de Autoridades), a high consultative council charged with matters vital to the security of the state, the next ranking member after the Governor-General was the archbishop of Manila. In the Council of Administration (Consejo de Administracion), another top level body which advised the governor-general on matters of finance, government and public development, the archbishop of Manila was also a member as were the heads of the six religious orders in the islands. In the Permanent Commission of Censorship (Commission Permanente de Censura), which had jurisdiction over the press and the introduction and circulation of books in the archipelago, half of the censors were friars. In the towns and pueblos, the multifarious functions now discharged by an array of municipal officials and employees were then centered in the parish priest, usually a friar, including supervision of local elections, inspection of schools and taxation, review of the municipal budget and censorship of literary productions."[1]

The political role played by the Catholic Church, particularly by the friars and the archbishop of Manila, led to periodic clashes between government and church authorities. For example:

> "a member of the Audiencia was excommunicated; the Commissary of the Holy Office of the Inquisition was arrested by the governor-general; Archbishop Hernando de Guerrero was forcibly arrested in his cathedral and exiled, and Governor Sebastian Corcuera was imprisoned for five years by his successor (at the instigation of his friar enemies). In 1668, the Inquisition entered the palace of the governor general, Diego Salcedo, seized his property and papers and placed him under arrest. In 1683, the incumbent archbishop, Felipe Pardo, was exiled by the governor- general, Juan de Vargas." [2]

The vast powers exercised by the friars gave them the opportunity to commit abuses. A number of the local revolts that took place in various parts of the country denounced friar intolerance, forced religious conversion and friar estates. In the 1860's. the Filipino priests led by Father Jose Burgos campaigned for the secularization of Philippine parishes to stop frailocracy and to make the Catholic Church truly responsive to the spiritual needs of the Filipino people. After Father Burgos' martyrdom in 1872 following the so-called Cavity Mutiny of 1872, Filipino propagandists led by Jose Rizal, Marcelo H. del Pilar and Graciano Lopez Jaena decided to campaign not only for religious but for total reforms. They called for the application of Spanish laws in the country and the political assimilation of the Philippines as a regular province of Spain. Rizal typified the sentiments of the mainstream propagandists when he said that his opposition was directed not against the Catholic religion but against the abuses of the friars and the evils of frailocracy and religious bigotry.

The failure of the Propaganda Movement to attain its objective of prodding the Spanish authorities in Madrid to establish genuine and meaningful reforms in the country through peaceful means, among others, sparked the rise of separatist sentiments especially among the restive and toiling masses. These inevitably led to the Philippine revolutions of 1896 and 1898. These twin political upheavals heightened the struggle against frailocracy and led not only to the establishment of the first independent republic in Asia but also to the adoption of a constitution (i.e., the Malolos Constitution) which provided for the separation of Church and State. The

fact that the latter won only by one vote in the Malolos Convention (over the provision making Catholicism the religion of the state) showed that the Filipinos then, while critical of the abuses of the friars, were not against the Catholic religion *per se*. Further evidence of this was the failure of the Philippine Independent Church (or Aglipayan church) to supplant the Catholic church as the "majority" church inspite of the nationalistic circumstances surrounding its birth.

The Malolos Constitution and the religious policies of the American occupation (1898-1946) paved the way for the secularization of the Philippine state. These diminished the political influence of the Catholic Church.

> "The legal system became wholly secularized. The Catholic faith lost its preferred position as the state religion. All restrictions imposed by law on sects or religions other than Catholic were removed automatically."[3]

The religious sentiments expressed by the Filipinos during the 1898 Malolos Convention were rearticulated in the 1934-35 Constitutional Convention. The 1935 Charter provided for the free exercise and enjoyment of religious profession and worship, without discrimination or preference. In 1935, the call for the establishment of the Catholic Church as a state religion was already dramatically muted.

After World War II, the Catholic Church maintained a low political visibility. It gave more attention to its pastoral duties and to relief and development work. Its charitable activities and social action programs provided a number of Filipinos with food, medicine and material help so that they could recover from the devastation and dislocation wrought by the Pacific war.[4] But this pastoral posture did not last long. It was alleged that the church started to indulge in some partisan political acts in the mid-1950s. For example, it was reported that it opposed Claro M. Recto as a senatorial candidate in 1955 and as a presidential candidate in 1957 because of his perceived anti-clerical views and, instead, supported Diosdado Macapagal's candidacy as Vice President in 1957 and as President in 1961 because of his pro-poor and reformist platform. Recto lost his presidential bid while Macapagal won the two posts he aspired for. The church was said to be neutral in the 1965 elections which was won by Ferdinand Marcos, a former Aglipayan who was converted to the Catholic religion.[5]

When Marcos declared martial law in 1972, the Catholic Church's initial response was one of silence and acquiscence. This stance isolated it from its priests, nuns and seminarians who were active in the mass actions against the Marcos I regime. The church hierarchy was able to recover some lost ground only after it started criticizing the martial law regime. This change of tactic, however, did not succeed in winning back its priests and nuns who had already joined the revolutionary underground.[6] The church's critical collaboration policy towards the government was derided by its progressive elements because of its conservative stand.

Martial law intensified the politicization of the Catholic Church. The church hierarchy became the *de facto* political opposition to the Marcos administration due to the exile, death, imprisonment and cooptation of the leaders of the traditional political parties (Nacionalista Party and Liberal Party). The suspicious circumstances surrounding the death of former Senator Benigno Aquino in 1983, the numerous human rights violations during the martial law period, the widening poverty of the people and the escalating political violence of the Marcos regime provided moral legitimacy and urgency to the political posturings of the church hierarchy, particularly Cardinal Sin. The latter became the rallying symbol of the majority of the people who were disgruntled with the status quo but who remained skeptical of, or opposed to, the revolutionary alternative offered by the CPP-NPA. The church hierarchy filled up the vacuum caused by the absence of a strong and credible political opposition.

The political stock of the Catholic Church in the eyes of the Filipino people was further enhanced when it joined the pro-Aquino and anti-Marcos forces in condemning the conduct and outcome of the 1986 snap presidential elections. Through the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), the Church said:

> "In our considered judgment, the polls were unparalleled in the fraudulence of their conduct. And we condemn especially ... the systematic disenfranchisement of voters ... the intimidation, harrassment, terrorism and murder.
>
> According to moral principles, a government that assumes or retains power through fraudulent means has no moral basis."[7]

The Catholic Church, particularly Cardinal Sin, played a key role in the EDSA revolt which toppled the Marcos regime and led to the restoration of democracy in the Philippines.[8] President Aquino acknowledged her political debt by appointing a bishop, a priest, a nun and an Opus Dei leader as members of the 1986-87 Constitutional Commission which drafted the present constitution.[9] Cardinal Sin became the unofficial spiritual and moral adviser of the Aquino administration and a number of Catholic lay leaders were appointed to key government positions. The 1986 EDSA revolution turned out to be very favorable to the Catholic Church because it boosted its political influence in the Philippines.

The Catholic Church reverted to its old role of critical collaboration with the government after 1992, when Fidel V. Ramos, a Protestant, won the presidency. Cardinal Sin and the hierarchy were generally believed to have supported Speaker Ramon Mitra for the top official post. Many policies of the Ramos administration, including the Philippines 2000 program, were negatively criticized by the CBCP and Cardinal Sin. The Cardinal became the foremost critic of President Ramos.

The Catholic Church As An Organization

The Catholic Church is a very formidable organization. It can rival, if not overwhelm, the government in terms of reach, influence and, even, resources.

According to Sister Christine Tan, the term "church" in current theology stands for the people of God, which means all Catholics. Thus, the Catholic Church in the Philippines refers not only to the Filipino cardinals, bishops, archbishops, priests, sisters, religious, and seminarians (this is the usual connotation of the term) but also to Filipinos who were baptized as Catholic.[11]

In 1995, it was estimated that over 82 percent of the Philippine population of 65 million are Catholics. The remaining 18 percent are Protestants (5.43 percent), Muslims (4.57 percent), Aglipayans (2.63 percent), Iglesia ni Kristo (2.54 percent), born-again Christians (0.53 percent), and others (2.30 percent).[12]

There is hardly any Philippine town or city where there is no active presence of the Catholic Church. There are 79 dioceses and 2,192 parishes

throughout the country administered by some 111 bishps, 3,407 diocesan priests, 2,165 religious priests, 9,873 religious sisters and 250 brothers.[13] The parishes are also supported by thousands of active lay ministers and church workers. Moreover, there are more than 2,000 church-run educational institutions ranging from grade schools to universities/colleges served by over 15,000 lay teachers and with more than 1 million students.[14]

> "In addition, religious congregations of men and women own or administer hundreds of high schools and grade schools. The Church also maintains 386 hospitals and clinics as well as radio stations, publishing houses and an undetermined number of social action and social services programs... Finally, there are thousands of lay Catholic organizations, ranging from Basic Ecclesial Community (BEC) of six or eight families to national level 'mandated' organizations and the Council of the Laity."[15]

Members of the Catholic Church are everywhere: they occupy key and responsible positions in the executive, legislative and judicial branches of the national government as well as in the military and local government units and in the private sector. By sheer number and resources, the Church has the potential to "make and unmake" the Philippine government. It is both a political and social force that cannot be ignored. Except for President Ramos, all Presidents of the Philippines have been Catholics.[16]

Obviously, the national interests will be served and promoted if there exists collaboration and goodwill, instead of conflict and distrust, between government and church leaders.

According to Bishop Teodoro Bacani, Cardinal Sin "is not the voice of the whole Catholic Church in the Philippines" and that "there is no supreme authority for the whole Catholic Church in the Philippines other than the Pope, who is in Rome."[17] Bishop Bacani disclosed that those who could speak for the Church are: the diocesan bishop -- for the local church is entrusted to him; the bishop of a given region -- for the Church in his region; the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), in plenary assembly or through the Permanent Council -- for the whole Catholic Church in the Philippines; the CBCP President or in his absence the Vice President -- for the whole conference when each and every bishop has given his consent; and the Permanent Committee on Public Affairs,

under certain conditions and in matters affecting Church-State relations -- for the CBCP

Notwithstanding this clarification of Bishop Bacani, there is the widespread belief of the Catholic faithful (and of the other sectors of Philippine society) that the spiritual head of the Philippine Catholic Church is Cardinal Sin (and whoever heads the Archdiocese of Manila). This is understandable considering that historically, the Archbishop of Manila post is a position of power and prestige, politically and religion-wise. During the Spanish period, the Archbishop of Manila acted as the *de facto* deputy Governor-General.

Through the years, the Catholic Church has been successful in grafting itself almost permanently in the hearts and minds of the Filipino people, nurturing their sense of religiosity and Christian values and ministering to their spiritual needs. It has emerged as the most respected institution in the country and has served as the people's conscience especially during critical times. The Catholic Church has provided the Filipinos with a "deep Christian faith and this has created so much good."

> "The current statistic is that we have one priest for every nine thousand Catholics. The number is a little misleading. It does not accurately represent the actual situation on the parish level. Not all the priests are available for parish work. A good number are doing specialized ministries.
>
> We do not have enough priests... By necessity, we have to settle ourselves with a mass Christianity until a miracle reverses the trend. We have the numbers but we lag behind in quality. With no priest to guide, church going can dwindle into folk religion. By the same token, pastoral ministry will have to be parish-based. The action is in the parish church and the day in Saturday. This means that those people are served who come to the parish church. The priest just does not have the time and the energy to go to the people."[18]

There are also reports that the Church is saddled by the clash between its conservative and progressive factions. Cardinal Sin is identified with the conservative faction. It was disclosed that he "... and his allies and the progressive bloc within the Church are often at odds with

each other, although it is obvious that Sin's more conservative faction enjoys an advantage."[19] The progressive faction includes the religious radicals.

The Catholic Church is also criticized for its excess "baggage" and lack of consistency and decisiveness. Sister Tan explained this as follows:

> "The Church as an institution ... has great potential, but she is muzzled for she carries too much baggage. Precisely, the miracle of EDSA was that despite all this baggage, the Roman Catholic Institutional Church got her act together and moved.Today, the lay cannot wait for the Church. The lay must lead."[20]

She deplored the Church's miniscule exposure to the poor, saying:

> "Malayung-malayo pa ang simbahan sa pagtuturo ng pagkakaisa. Konting-konti lang ang madre at pari na nasa maralita -- siguro one percent -- so let us encourage these efforts because our country is dying."[21]

Sister Tan continued her assessment of the Church:

> "Experience has painfully shown that a vast difference exists beween what our church does. Our track record during the Marcos dictatorship bears evidence of the gap. We have by and large neither been consistent nor inspiring. For how many years have bishops, priests, and sisters condoned the dictatorship through public approval?
>
> As for the present government, our actions can be confusing. Some of us condemn gambling with our lips but with our hands accept substantial donations from PAGCOR ... The institutional church is as distant as Shakespeare. There seems to be no connection with our lives."[22]

Bishop Capalla also criticized the lack of decisiveness of the Church, saying:

> "The Church is losing its voice in the country. We are not coming out as strong as we could. What happened to our

> CBCP pastoral letters? They are very diplomatic. We do not call a spade a spade and so we don't create as much impact.
>
> There is no sense of absolute wrong or right and the Church doesn't seem to be doing enough about this."[23]

Authority for Active Church Involvement in Politics

Three events or developments are often cited by Catholic Church leaders in explaining and justifying the active involvement of the Catholic Church in Philippine politics. These are the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the 1971 Synod of Bishops and the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (1991).

The Second Vatican Council (or popularly called Vatican II) adopted a number of historic documents, to include the Apostolican *Actuositatem* (The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity) and the *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World).

In the Apostolican *Actuositatem,* the Church emphatically states that:

> "Christ's redemptive work, while of itself directed toward the salvation of men, involves also the renewal of the whole temporal order. Hence, the mission of the Church is not only to bring to men the message and grace of Christ, but also to penetrate and perfect the temporal sphere with the spirit of the gospel."[24]

The document also stresses that "... pastors have the duty to provide moral and spiritual help for the renewal of the order in Christ."[25] This includes political renewal.

In the *Gaudium et Spes,* it calls on the laity who have

> "talent for the difficult yet noble art of politics ... to engage in political activity. They must combat injustice and oppression, arbitrary domination and intolerance by

> individuals or political parties, and they must do so with integrity and wisdom. They must dedicate themselves to the welfare of all in a spirit of sincerity and fairness, of love and of the courage demanded by political life."[26]

The *Gaudium* document explains that

> "The church, by reason of her role and competence, is not identified with any political community nor bound by this to any political system ...
>
> Their political community and the church are autonomous and interdependent of each other in their own fields.
>
> ... at all times and in all places, the church should have the freedom to preach the faith, to proclaim its teaching about society, to carry out its task among men without hindrance, and to pass moral judgment even in matters relating to politics, whenever the fundamental rights of man or the salvation of souls require it."[27]

The effect of Vatican II on the church and on Christian life is dramatic. A Filipino lay leader summarized this as follows:

> "Vatican II underscored the need for man's total or integral development ... This means that a Christian should act out his faith in all aspects of his life, whether spiritual, temporal, economic, social, cultural or political. In other words, a Christian's integral development requires him to apply gospel values wherever he is and whatever he does, whether at home, in school, in the office, in the polling place, or when elected to a public office.
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> Hence the church must be wherever there is sinfulness, persecution, injustice and violation of human dignity. Chrisitianity means not merely salvation of souls for the next life but the liberation of man in the present life from all forms of oppression so that he may fully develop in all dimensions -- spiritual, economic, social, cultural and political.

> Vatican II recognized the laity's equality with the clergy in dignity and mission."[28]

The second event which has energized the Philippine Catholic Church was the 1971 Synod of Bishops. Its document entitled "Justice in the World" rearticulates the spirit of Vatican II when it says that

> "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel, or in other words, of the church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation every oppressive situation."[29]

This document affirms the church's role as instrument in the liberation of women from all forms of oppression. It anchors the theology of the church on human redemption and liberation.

The third event was the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines in 1991. Consistent with the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, it declares that "in the Philippines today, given the general perception that politics has become an obstacle to integral development, the urgent necessity is for the lay faithful to participate more actively, with singular competence and integrity, in political affairs."[30] The Council calls on Filipino Catholics to "participate actively and lead in the renewing of politics in accordance with values of the Good News of Jesus" and "to help form the civic conscience of the voting population and work to explicitly promote the election to public office of leaders of true integrity."[31] It also exhorts the "bishops, priests and religious, commonly identified as the Church, to refrain from partisan politics and avoid especially the use of the pulpit for partisan purposes to avoid division among the flock they shepherd."[32]

The pronouncements of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), Synod of Bishops and the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines have bestowed on the Philippine Catholic Church and its hierarchy a messianic mission: to "save" the Filipino and enhance his freedom by actively involving itself in the renewal and liberation of Philippine society and politics consistent with the teachings of Christ and gospel values. This mission, which presently stands as the church's theological direction, accounts for its continuing involvement in Philippine political affairs. Pope

John Paul II underscored this when he told the Filipino bishops in 1995 that the church is called

> "to exercise a truly prophetic role, condemning the evils of men in their infected source, showing the roots of division and bringing hope in the possibility of over-coming tensions and conflicts and reaching brotherhood, concord and peace at all levels and in all sections of human society."[33]

Pronouncements of Church Leaders

In recent times, several influential members of the Church hierarchy and priests have articulated their views on the role of the Philippine Catholic Church and its right relationship with the Philippine State (or government). Invariably, they interpreted the constitutional provision on the separation of church and state as allowing the church to take a political but non-partisan role.

Cardinal Sin argued that the state is part of a moral order that is subject to a higher law revealed by Christ. He said:

> "Following the tradition of St. Thomas Aquinas and the political philosophy of the Scholastics, the Church asserts that the rights of the person, the family, the church and the associations which men and women freely organize for economic, cultural, social and religious ends constitute an order of rights prior to the State.
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> Since the state exists to serve the common welfare in the areas of justice, peace, security, and liberty, it comes under the moral order.
>
> ... the state is subject to judgment by a law inherent in the nature of man and by a higher law revealed by Christ."[34]

The logical implication of this view is that the Church should provide counsel to the state (or in particular to the government); participate in the renewal and reform of the various dimensions of human life including the political; and exercise moral ascendancy over the State. Cardinal Sin hinted these when he remarked that "politics is a human

activity and thus has moral dimension. It is included in my pastoral duty because the people cannot speak. I have to speak for them."[35]

Bishop Teodoro Bacani, one of the most articulate clerical leaders at present, maintains that Church participation in Philippine politics is "part of the faith-response of the Catholics to the Lord in today's situation." According to him,

> "... the Church is not a monastery, a Noah's Ark, a judge's tribunal or a fortress. It is a fellow pilgrim and servant of humanity. It must involve itself in the transformation of the world, and hence in political activity without which this world will not be transformed." He describes Church participation in political activity as a battle against human sinfulness as well as a battle to make God's grace victorious in the Philippines.[36]

Regarding the constitutionally mandated separation of Church and State, Bishop Bacani says:

> "The Philippine constitution does not forbid or prevent the Church from influencing the political life of our country. The Church has as much right as any cause-oriented group to express its mind regarding the way the country is being run. The Church is not prohibited by our constitution from proposing a political vision or expressly supporting certain candidates or political party.
>
> The reserve that the Church keeps in this regard stems rather from the nature of the Church, from Canon Law, and from pastoral prudence.
>
> Hence, the separation of Church and State cannot be used as an argument against the involvement of the Catholic faithful an of the Church itself in shaping the political future of our country."[37]

The views of Bishop Bacani are reinforced by Fr. Joaquin Bernas, a theologian-constitutionalist and a member of the 1986 Constitutional Commission:

> "... Churchmen have every right to participate in the debate about what public policy should be. The right flows not only from the free exercise clause but also from other constitutional guarantees. In the exercise of this right, however, care must be taken that no infringement of the religious liberty of others be committed. Moreover, the dictates of apostolic prudence must be heeded lest excessive zeal alienate men of goodwill and reduce church authority to irrelevance."[38]

Fr. Bernas contends that the non-establishment clause of the Bill of Rights is

> "aimed not at the power of religion but at the power of the State and of abusive state functionaries ... As far as the churches and religion as well as religionists are concerned, the rule is freedom and the function of the non-establishment clause is to protect that freedom."[39]

Fr. Romeo Intengan, on the other hand, clarifies the political role of the Church by differentiating politics from political commitment. He says:

> "Politics has to do with ethical matters and everything that concerns human dignity, fundamental human rights, the common good, and social justice. Politics as commitment has to do with technical matters -- concrete decisions, programs, campaigns and the exercise of power. Politics is a task of the whole Church -- and here the pastors properly exercise their teaching role. Political commitment is a task for the laity, acting with a lawful conscience informed by the Gospel.
>
> In performing her evangelizing mission, the church claims the freedom to preach the faith, to teach her social doctrine, and to pass moral judgment in those matters which concern public order."[40]

The rule as to what the pastors and the laity can do, according to Father Intengan, is not an absolute one. He states that

> "... The distinction must be seen as secondary to a more basic principle that politics, whether as a field (where politics and morality meet) or arena (where more concrete and technical politics, usually of the partisan kind, is played), like all human activities, must be exercised always in the light of the faith of the Gospel. As a corollary, the requirements of the gospel with regard to human dignity, justice, charity and the common good cannot be sacrificed to the exigencies of one's politics. The latter must be rejected when it threatens to violate or deny the non-negotiable demands of Christian faith. Concretely, this means that both pastors and laity must be involved in the political arena when field and arena are one."[41]

These views of Cardinal Sin, Bishop Bacani, Fr. Bernas and Fr. Intengan are representative of the mainstream theological currents in the Philippines following Vatican II. If pursued to their logical end, their views are used to justify the Catholic Church's exercise of a political but non-partisan role and formalize its moral ascendancy over the state. This would obviously create complications for a secular and pluralistic state like the Philippines since it is not easy to separate and distinguish the partisan from the non-partisan political act. It may be precisely because of this problem why Pope John Paul II counselled the bishops of the Philippines ". . . not to take positions of a political character or to take part in partisan conflicts."[42] The Filipino clerical leaders did not heed the papal advice in 1986 and the result was their historic role in the 1986 EDSA revolt. The bishops' action did not provoke a constitutional crisis at that time since it supported the victorious political faction and the outcome met with the approval of the people. What could have happened to church-state relations if the EDSA revolt ended differently?

Church Stand on Selected Issues

In the immediate past, the Catholic Church acted as an oppositionist and critical collaborator of government. It was effective and credible in the discharge of these roles. By acting as the people's shepherd in time of national crisis and anxiety and by providing moral and spiritual leadership, the Church becomes an agent of democracy and political stability. By acting as a safety valve, it assists in diffusing the heat and polarizes that which incinerates the political soul of the nation.

During the Marcos II years, the Catholic Church was less collaborative. It was more oppositionist. It called for the abolition of the Presidential Commitment Order (PCO) which was used in detaining citizens suspected of subversion without trial or bail; criticized the employment of secret marshals as a violation of the right to life and the decree-making powers of Marcos as open to grave abuse; questioned the fraud which accompanied the 1986 snap elections; appealed for renewed peace talks; and called for greater discipline among the police and the military as well as the disarming of private armies and paramilitary forces whom it saw as responsible for grave violations of life and property.[43]

The Church was also consistently firm in asking the people to have the courage to testify before the courts of law when crimes were committed. It exhorted the courts to administer justice swiftly and impartially; the legislators to improve the administration of justice; the people in the media to be truthful and responsible in their manner of reporting; and the rebel groups on the Left and Right to be respectful of human rights.[44]

The church was again at its critical collaboration mode with the Ramos administration. It continued to oppose government efforts to promote family planning through artificial contraception, to popularize the use of condoms to prevent the spread of the AIDs disease, and to promote legalized gambling like lotto and casinos.[45] Moreover, it criticized the Philippines 2000 Program because of its anti-poor provisions; called for the suspension of the expanded value added tax law (VAT); and opposed the efforts to amend the 1987 Constitution so that the term of office of the incumbent officials, particularly President Ramos, would be extended. It was also strongly critical of the anti-criminality and anti-terrorism bills since these contained provisions that threatened the basic liberties of the people such as wiretapping, prying into bank deposits and financial papers, and allowing the arrest and detention of people without warrant in the name of national security.[46]

To combat criminality, the Church (through the CBCP) recommended the following: proper coordination among government offices in the fight against crime; swift but just resolution of cases by courts of justice which must be above suspicion of collusion with crime lords; speedy purge of notorious violators from the ranks of the police and the military; strict and thorough screening of applicants to the police force and the military and their continuing values formation; provision of sufficient

personnel and material resources to all government agencies involved in the prevention and punishment of crimes; cooperation between the citizenry and media in the fight against crime; and strict enforcement of the regulation that only authorized persons be allowed to carry guns in public.[47]

The Church, through the CBCP, has also been trying to influence the outcome of Philippine elections by formulating a set of criteria for political candidates. In 1995, it called on the faithful to vote for candidates who met the following criteria: (a) they must have pursued with persistency and consistency the common good; (b) they must have been a vigorous defender and promoter of justice; they must be imbued with the "maka-Diyos" spirit of service; (c) they must possess an enduring and preferential option for the poor; and (d) they must have the necessary competence to effectively perform those tasks and responsibilities required by law. The bishops as well as the leaders of lay organizations called for the rejection of candidates who were power hungry; had vices and unexplained wealth; and who resorted to guns, gold and goons to win the elections. [48] These vices included "shady deals, extravagant spending, riotous living, gambling, womanizing and excessive drinking."[49]

The most visible and far-reaching contribution of the Catholic Church to the renewal of Philippine elections is the formation of the Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPC-RV). While the Council is regarded as a laity initiative and laity-led, it cannot be denied that it was formed principally by the church hierarchy as its arm in political action. Its Board of Advisers in composed of influential members of the CBCP with Jaime Cardinal Sin and Ricardo Cardinal Vidal as Honorary Co-Chairmen. The immediate objective of the PPC-RV is to educate the people in the responsible use of the right to vote while its ultimate goal is the promotion of the common welfare, good government and democracy. The formation of the Council serves as the Church's formal declaration of war against trditional politicians and the politics of guns, gold and goons.[50]

From all indications, the Church played a political role in the 1998 presidential elections. It promulgated an initial set of guidelines to assist the laity in choosing the right presidential candidate. According to the CBCP, the people should support the presidential candidate who has shown competence, honesty in both private and public life, good leadership, and good track record.[51]

The Church and Public Opinion

It is instructive to look at the people's perception of the Catholic Church and its role in Philippine society.

Dr. Temario Rivera of the UP Department of Political Science noted that the majority of the Filipinos actually do not look with favor at a Church that interferes with governmental and electoral processes. His view is supported by the results of the July 1991 national survey conducted by the Social Weather Station (SWS) which showed that about 65 percent of respondents believed that the Catholic Church should not interfere in elections while about 63 percent indicated that the Church should not interfere likewise in government.

Inspite of this perception, the Catholic Church had the highest margin of trust (+66 percent in 1989 and +65 percent in August 1990), surpassing government offices like the Supreme Court (+36 percent in 1989), Congress (+35 percent in 1989), the Senate (+ 16 percent in 1989) and the police (+20 percent in 1989) as well as the private sector such as the broadcast media (+40 percent in 1989), print media (+24 percent in 1989), and the business community (+20 percent in 1989). These were the results of the SWS nationwide survey of September 1989 and the SWS Metro Manila survey of August 1990.

On the propriety of church personnel being involved in the work for clean elections, SWS surveys showed that the pro group was exceeded by the anti group (30% pro vs. 39% anti in July1985 and 34% pro vs 45% anti in April 1986). This means that there were more Filipinos who did not favor the involvement of church personnel in election-related work, even if these were well-meaning, and that their number was increasing faster than those who favored church involvement. As to the propriety of the Church supporting specific election candidates, again the anti group exceeded the pro group (30% pro vs. 39% anti in July 1985 and 34% pro vs. 45% anti in April 1986). This means that there were more people who thought that the Church should not support any specific candidate and that their number was increasing faster compared to those who believed otherwise.

In a related 1990 Metro Manila survey, Prof. Mahar Mangahas of the SWS observed that about 35 percent agreed that Church leaders wielded too much political influence while only 21 percent disagreed and the rest (44 percent) were uncertain. One surprising aspect of the survey

was the finding that the public is somewhat divided on whether churches should participate in social issues. The proportion of the pro to the anti group was 38 percent to 33 percent in July 1989 and 40 percent to 40 percent in April 1986. While the respondents were evenly divided initially, however, the number of those who favored church participation in social issues increased faster through the years compared to those who were opposed.

The results of the 1990 survey on whether churches had the right to speak out on issues like coup d'etat, agrarian reform or corruption in government showed an evenly divided public: about 32 percent agreed while about 31 percent disagreed. The survey results showed an interesting regional pattern which was quite instructive: people throughout Luzon and those in urban Visayas leaned more towards the non-involvement of the Church in politics. On the other hand, people in rural Visayas and throughout Mindanao were more sympathetic to such kind of involvement.

The trend shown by the previews SWS surveys appeared to be reinforced by the public opinion surveys conducted by the Ateneo de Manila Social Weather Station. A 1986 Ateneo survey revaled that

> "... Respondents were evenly divided (40% pro vs. 40% anti with 17% undecided) on whether the church should not get involved in the struggle of the oppressed. A plurality (45% pro vs. 34% anti with 18% undecided) agreed that it should not get involved in working for clean and honest elections while a larger plurality (49% pro vs. 29% anti with 19% undecided) agreed that it should not support any candidate in an election. The percentages opposed to Church involvement were larger than those registered for similar questions a year earlier, suggesting that some who were in favor of the Church's involvement during the crisis of 1985-86 now felt that it was time for the latter to return to the sacristy."[52]

Ateneo conducted another church-related survey in 1991. It

> "... asked a nationwide sample whether the church or church groups have a role to play in politics. The respondents were also equally divide, 43% saying yes and 41% saying no. But when asked specific activities which the church or church groups might undertake, the only one which received majority approval (84%) was protecting human rights. Strong majorities disapproved of the Church as critic of government actions, opposing government programs such that on population, indicating who should be elected, supporting politically oriented groups, and and supporting rebel groups. Even explaining side of political issues was thumbed down by a small majority (53% pro vs. 38% anti with 5% undecided)."[53]

The surveys conducted by the Social Weather Station and the Ateneo de Manila University indicate that the Filipinos are evenly divided on the propriety of the Catholic Church taking a political role.

Some Forecasts and Areas of Concern

It is very likely that the Catholic Church will not modify or abandon its theology of liberation. As a result, the future will see the church and its hierarchy more actively involved in political activities that it considers as pro-poor and anchored on gospel values.

Sister Tan stated this rather dramatically: "If political power is what is needed to bring about change, then it is our duty to help the poor to be in power. But it should not be us who should be in power."[54]

Father Intengan has a more comprehensive view on the future role of the Catholic Church. According to him:

> "The situation demands that the Church stress patriotism as a Christian virtue and emphasize that one central purpose of political community should be the promotion of the common good. The Church should cooperate in efforts to put an end to the traditional

> politics based on personalities and patronage, and to promote authentic politics, which is based on the rational appreciation of ideologies, programs of government and qualifications for public office. Another obvious duty of the church would be to help develop and strengthen Philippine culture, while purifying it according to gospel norms. The church is also forced by circumstances to take up suppletory function in society by setting up structures to make up for what is lacking in civil institutions. For example, the church has to help set-up livelihood and health projects, supplement the civil communications network, guard the sanctity of the ballot with organization of poll watchers, and defend the integrity of creation and the habitability of the environment through education and gallant action."[55]

Bishop Bacani also further predicted that in the future,

> "... political activity will increase rather than wane until everyone takes it for granted that the Christian faith is to be exercised in all the dimensions of human living and that the church has also been entrusted with a mission to renew the temporal order. The Church in the Philippines will not rest content until the whole Filipino nation becomes a disciple of Christ even in its political activity."[56]

One may ask: where will all these exhortations lead the Filipinos? To a regime of greater freedom and human dignity (which was also the goal of Filipino priests like Father Burgos and Father Aglipay) or to a regime of religious intolerance and theocracy (or Catholic fundamentalism) which may prove repugnant to the democratic values sought to be strengthened by the church?

This question is raised in the light of some clerical statements that are quite disturbing (hopefully, these are only isolated cases). For example, Fr. James Reuter, spokesman of the CBCP, was quoted as saying that any "politician who attacks the Catholic Church is commiting suicide."[57] Evidently, this statement induces some anxieties since it implies that the Church is omnipotent and will not tolerate criticism especially from public officials. In a democratic society like the Philippines, no organization, not

even a highly respected one like the Church, can claim to have a monopoly of righteousness and nationalism.

Another disturbing statement is the one attributed to Archbishop Manuel Salvador of Cebu. He was said to have "... urged the faithful to vote for Catholic candidates and reject bets identified with Free Masonry and non-Catholic sects."[58] If true, this statement could encourage religious fanaticism (particularly Catholic fundamentalism) and undue polarization of the people and destroy the secular character of the Philippines state. Obviously, the more rational posture is for the people to judge candidates not according to their religion and associations but according to their platform or program of government, integrity, competence and track record. Fortunately for Philippine democracy, the CBCP shares this posture.

The statements of Fr. Reuter and Archbishop Salvador suggest one thing: that internally, the Catholic Church is experiencing some difficulty in defining its political but non-partisan role in the context of the realities and dynamics of Philippine politics and society. This is not an easy task for the Church hierarchy and any preciptous move may not be in the interest of the Church and of the greater society.

The State should not take any action that will heighten the radicalization of the Church's conservative and moderate elements, inspite of the latter's seeming anti-government stance on many issues. The government will be faced with multiple and more serious problems if Church-State conflicts undermine the secular and pluralistic character of the Philippines state and abet the rise of religious fundamentalism.

The collective interests of the people will be best served if the Catholic Church and the State work together as strategic partners, and not as mutually antagonistic competitors for the renewal and reformation of man and his political, economic and social environment. The state must accommodate, if not accept, the current dispensation that the present Church-State relation is anchored no longer on the principle of separation but on the principle of collaboration and mutual partnership, and that the modern church justifies its existence by working not only for the salvation of souls but for the liberation of man from all forms of human bondage and sinfulness.

A situation that allows the Catholic Church to relate with the government as a strategic partner and responsible critic is a big boost to the peace and order, political stability, economic development and social equilibrium of the Philippines in the 21st century. The State should manifest extraordinary patience and maturity in creating and sustaining the policy environment while it creatively builds formal and informal structures and processes that will allow ideal relationship to flourish and endure.

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Endnotes

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